

The Achiever

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"The whole community needs to know what the data is saying and what we're doing about the data."

Six years ago, when Venetian Hills Elementary School in Atlanta failed once again to meet basic academic standards, it was identified by the state as "needing improvement" and ordered to offer students free tutoring or transfers to better-performing schools.

At the start of school that same year, Clarietta Davis was appointed principal. Facing an audience of anxious parents at open house night, she vowed, "We're going to be more deliberate with the way we deliver instruction, and we're going to deliver instruction with more rigor."

Today, Venetian Hills—where all but a handful

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"Promising Gains" Among Urban School Districts

Nation's Report Card Reveals Greatest Increases in Math

According to the latest results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress, or the Nation's Report Card, 11 urban school districts have made steady improvement in both reading and math.

Most of the participating districts in the 2007 Trial Urban District Assessment—released in November by the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics—demonstrated greater gains in math. The study also showed that, while the gains for the low-income and minority student populations in these districts were typically greater than the national average, in some cases student performance

among the urban district students was better than the national average.

"No Child Left Behind is working and as a nation, our achievement gap is closing," said U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings. "While [the] results point to promising gains among our nation's urban school districts, much work remains to ensure all students achieve grade-level success by 2014 and that students in urban elementary schools—and all schools—have the basic reading skills required for success in every other subject."

The report also revealed:

- In math, eight districts recorded increases in scores in the fourth grade compared to 2003, and four districts had higher average scores compared with

> continued on page 2



2005. In the eighth grade, eight districts recorded increases compared to 2003, and six districts had higher average scores compared with 2005.

► In reading, four districts showed increases in scores in the fourth grade compared to 2002, and two districts had higher average scores than in 2005, while two districts showed increases in the eighth-grade scores compared to 2002, and four districts had higher average scores than in 2005.

Secretary's Corner~

Photo by Paul Wood



U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings joined singer Melinda Doolittle (pictured above) and Dave Barger, CEO of JetBlue Airways and chair of The League, a nonprofit organization that focuses on educating youths on the importance of philanthropy, for a panel discussion about character education at The League's town hall meeting in New York City on Nov. 5. An excerpt of her remarks follows.

"... Schools offer a stable, safe environment to learn not only the lessons of math and reading but also principles such as self-respect, integrity, and responsibility. As one teacher put it, 'You build a community in your classroom. You build a community around the school by getting parents involved ... and you teach children to go out in the world and make a contribution to the world.' ...

"But just like with *No Child Left Behind*, the most meaningful contribution [of these character education programs] has been a

sharpened focus on what is most effective: making sure these programs are evaluated based on evidence, not opinion....

"Five years ago, we required our character education programs to evaluate their success based on evidence. At the time, this had never been done before, and those in the field had a lot of questions. Like, how do you measure success when student and teacher populations are so mobile? And how do you integrate character education with other subjects? How do you know if character education contributed to academic achievement?

"My Department worked to answer these and other questions. And the results of those efforts can be found in the new guide we're releasing today.

"It provides a road map to help educators do what works best. We've also started to get our first round of evaluations from our grantees, and the results confirm that students performed better in schools where character education programs were well implemented. ... I hope it will prove a useful resource ... as you continue this important work."

For a free copy of the guide, *Mobilizing for Evidence-Based Character Education*, visit <http://www.ed.gov/programs/chartered/resources.html>, or call 1-877-4ED-PUBS with identification number ED003813P, while supplies last.

Charting Progress

A new report examining the Title I program, which provides federal funding to the nation's neediest schools, reveals "substantial progress [was made] in the last six years, but more work needs to be done" to bring every student to the proficient level in reading and math by 2014.

Published in two volumes, the *National Assessment of Title I Final Report* provides recent data evaluating 1) the implementation and impact of the program under *No Child Left Behind* and 2) the effectiveness of four remedial reading programs. Among the key findings were that more students in most subgroups were performing on grade level, though gains at the high school level were lagging, and that 75 percent of all schools and districts met their states' adequate yearly progress (AYP) targets in 2004-05, while 18 percent of Title I schools were identified as needing improvement. For the full report, visit <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee>. ■

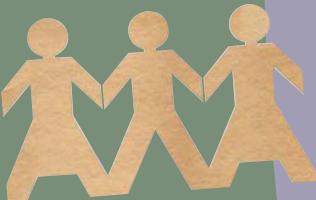


The 11 districts participating in the Trial Urban District Assessment included: Atlanta, Austin, Boston, Charlotte-Mecklenburg, Chicago, Cleveland, District of Columbia, Houston, Los Angeles, New York City and San Diego. For more information, visit <http://nationsreportcard.gov>.

Special Services

This March, the U.S. Department of Education will announce the names of six states chosen to take part in the development of a new national education center aimed at improving student achievement, particularly for students with disabilities. The Department awarded a \$5 million grant over the next five years to the University of South Florida to establish the Center on State Implementation and Scaling-up of Evidence-based Practices at its Tampa campus, in order to broaden the use of proven, well-researched education strategies.

Through a partnership with the universities of Connecticut and Oregon, researchers at South Florida will work initially with the selected states to increase their capacity to provide the technical assistance needed by school districts in such areas as inclusion, assessments and Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) to support the achievement of students with special needs. Lessons learned from these states will be disseminated nationwide through a Web site, conferences and publications. ■



<<Around the Country>>



of students qualify for the free lunch program—has been given a new label: 2007 No Child Left Behind—Blue Ribbon School, the highest recognition for academic excellence from the U.S. Department of Education. Student performance has improved sharply during Davis' tenure, with approximately 96 percent of its students in grades 3–5 now performing at grade level in reading and math, according to the latest data.

Venetian Hills "proves that with hard work, every student can achieve great things," said Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings, who gave much credit to the school's leadership during a recent visit.

Davis—honored two years ago as one of Georgia's High Performance Principals, and recently as one of six recipients of the Department's Terrell H. Bell Award for Exemplary Leadership—said it all began with analyzing test score data. Being promoted to principal, following positions as assistant principal and teacher at Venetian Hills, "caused me to look at my data much, much closer. And not just looking at the data—but tying names into those numbers," she explained.

Data are drawn from a battery of national, state and teacher-developed tests that help educators pinpoint how well students have mastered academic standards so instruction can be tailored accordingly. Data meetings are a standard practice among the staff, involving even the teachers of non-core subjects such as art and physical education. Colorful bar graphs charting each classroom's progress are permanent wall fixtures throughout the school. They often spark questions among the students.



"Whenever you put something on display, you're going to have to explain it," said Davis. "When they see their teacher's name on the board, they want to know, 'Why is that bar here? And why is this teacher's bar there?' ...

The whole community needs to know what the data is saying and what we're doing about the data."

While data analysis has provided Venetian Hills the map of the road to success, a comprehensive school reform

program called Project GRAD has been the vehicle that has made progress possible.

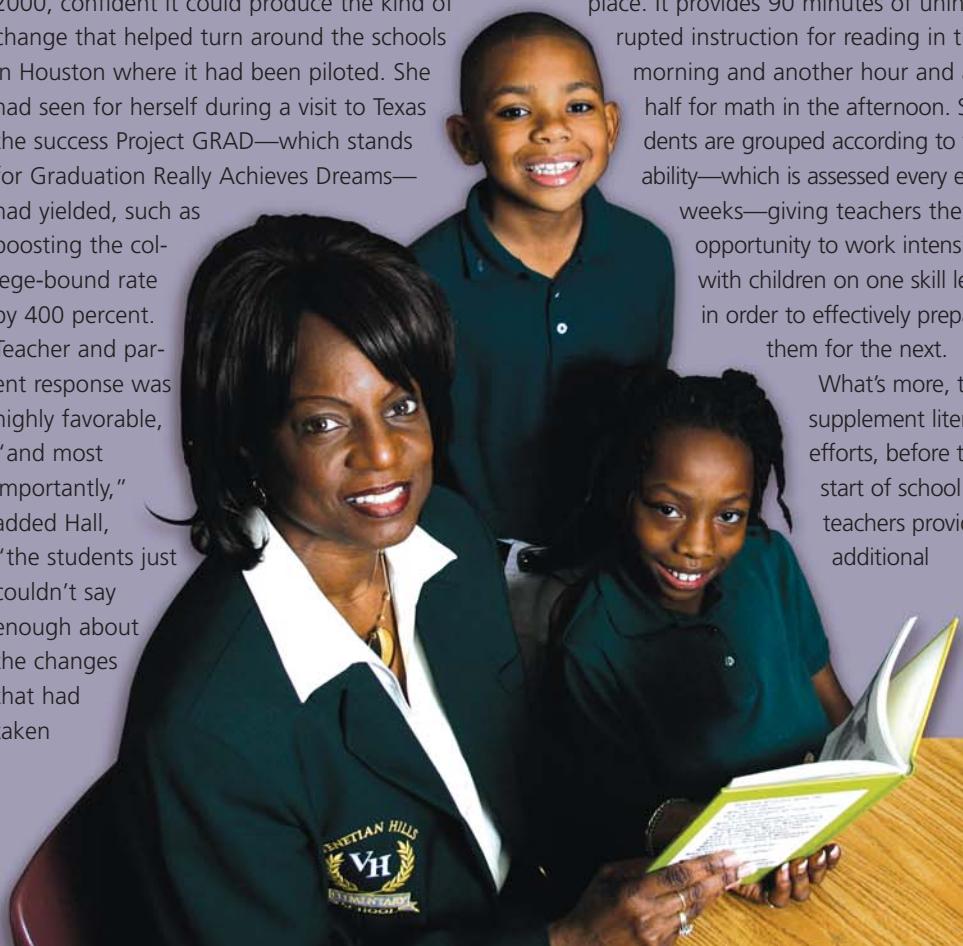
Superintendent Beverly Hall introduced the reform model to Atlanta Public Schools in 2000, confident it could produce the kind of change that helped turn around the schools in Houston where it had been piloted. She had seen for herself during a visit to Texas the success Project GRAD—which stands for Graduation Really Achieves Dreams—had yielded, such as boosting the college-bound rate by 400 percent. Teacher and parent response was highly favorable, "and most importantly," added Hall, "the students just couldn't say enough about the changes that had taken

place in both the environment and the quality of teaching as a result of this program."

Project GRAD offers a network of interventions addressing both school and family life from grades K to 12. The 16-year-old program, which was born out of a college scholarship intended to curb the dropout rate at one of Houston's lowest-performing high schools, is built on a "feeder system" that consists of a high school and all the elementary and middle schools that send students into it. The model focuses on five core programs: literacy; math; classroom management; social services and parent involvement; and high school, which promises eligible graduates a \$4,000 college scholarship.

Venetian Hills was among the first cluster of schools to adopt Project GRAD in Atlanta. Implementation began with a new curriculum that allowed for a great deal of professional development and research-based practices to be put into place. It provides 90 minutes of uninterrupted instruction for reading in the morning and another hour and a half for math in the afternoon. Students are grouped according to their ability—which is assessed every eight weeks—giving teachers the opportunity to work intensively with children on one skill level in order to effectively prepare them for the next.

What's more, to supplement literacy efforts, before the start of school teachers provide additional



CALIFORNIA—In an effort to prevent more students from dropping out of high school, the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) has launched a new campaign targeting at-risk teenagers that will draw on the popularity of Internet Web sites such as YouTube and MySpace as well as on radio spots to feature testimonials from former dropouts. In addition, the district has

created a Web site, <http://www.myfuturemydecision.com>, to highlight alternative ways of earning a diploma and to describe its numerous continuation schools and community college programs. With more than 25 percent of Los Angeles students dropping out in 2006, LAUSD—the nation's second-largest district—is seeking to reduce the dropout rate by 5 percent this school year.

instruction to students falling behind, while Hands On Atlanta, Pomona Park Community and Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. provide tutoring for children during and after school. Also, through a Reading First grant from the U.S. Department of Education, Venetian Hills acquired its own reading coach to further support K-3 learners. Explains Principal Davis about the various initiatives, "By 2014, we're expected to have all of our children reading on grade level. We're not going to wait until 2013 to get started."

As a result, not only has reading performance increased—last year, 100 percent of third-graders proved at least proficient, with three-fourths exceeding standards—but so has the motivation to read. "I had one student that did not want to return the book because he loved it so much," said the school's media specialist,

Sheila Johnson.

"I told him there're other books you'll fall in love with too."

Along with book giveaways and other incentives funded through Project GRAD, Johnson said the program has engaged students by "enabling children to take ownership of their learning." As part of its classroom management feature, in each group students elect one another for roles as team captain, recorder, materials manager, reporter and timekeeper.

Another aspect of this reform model that has been a critical catalyst for change reaches beyond school doors. As coordinator of social services and parent involvement at Venetian

Hills, Carrie Woodyard has been involved in matters from getting medical attention for a child who was constantly sleeping in class

TEXAS—More than 20,000 free, new books for adolescent students were distributed to Austin-area schools, libraries and community organizations in November, thanks to a collaborative effort among the U.S. Department of Education, Townsend Press and First Book—a nonprofit organization whose mission is to provide books to children in need. The distribution is part of a national campaign to provide 520,000 books to improve the

to intervening with a utility company to prevent a family's lights from being turned off. In making home visits, monitoring student attendance and building community partnerships, her goal is simply to minimize those distractions that challenge children from coming to school or rob them from learning when they are there. Woodyard, who worked for departments of family and children services for 20 years, said the need for this full-time position is essential in disadvantaged schools like hers: "I think it opens everyone's eyes as to what we're dealing with instead of stereotyping children and saying, 'Oh, this little child cannot learn,' not knowing the real dynamics."

She is also part of the school's Family Solutions Team, which includes the principal and the reading and math specialists, who meet weekly to address such issues and thereafter with parents to discuss their children's academic and attendance progress. In addition, once a month the team hosts a morning meeting called "Second Cup of Coffee" to update parents on student achievement data

and how far they've advanced with school reform progress. And, every Thursday, a packet of students' work samples, teachers' notes, school communication letters and other announcements is sent home for parents' comments and signatures.

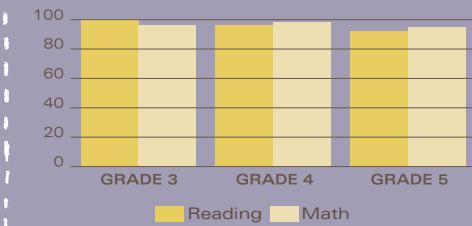
Needless to say, parent participation continues to grow, especially encouraged by the increasing success that began with Principal Davis' appointment in 2002. "If you can hook them that first year, you have them on board with you," she said.

—By Nicole Ashby

Venetian Hills Elementary School



- **Grade Span:** K-5
- **Locale:** Urban
- **Total Students:** 383
- **Race/Ethnicity Enrollment:** 98% African-American, 2% white
- **Free and Reduced-Price Lunch Eligible:** 96%
- **English Language Learners:** 2%
- **Special Education Students:** 7%
- **Percentage Proficient*:**



*According to 2007 results on state exam.

- **Interesting Fact:** Over the past six years, Venetian Hills has moved from being on the state's list for needing improvement to earning the national honor of Blue Ribbon School.

Photos, from left to right: U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings joins first-grader Joshua in a classroom project; Principal Clarietta Davis with third-graders Prince and Iyana; and kindergarten teacher Sammie Fryar helps Terrence with his work while Demond waits his turn. On the cover, first-grader Tyana. Spellings photo by Scott King. All other photos by Maisie Crow.

literacy skills of struggling adolescent readers. Since June 2006, the Department, First Book and major book publishers have distributed more than 1.65 million children's books in hurricane-affected communities and across the country. Most of the titles donated for the Adolescent Readers Initiative are from Townsend Press' *Bluford Series*, which focuses on a group of urban high school students and their families.

January

Magnet Schools Month.

As part of the celebration, Magnet Schools of America is inviting communities to host special activities and events and is sponsoring a poster contest that will conclude on Jan. 25. Visit <http://www.magnet.edu>, or call 202-824-0672.

Jan. 14

PTA Art Exhibit Opening,

at the U.S. Department of Education headquarters in Washington, D.C., will showcase the 2007 winners of the PTA Reflections Program "My Favorite Place." For a virtual gallery, visit <http://pta.browsermedia.com>. To attend, e-mail marilyn.joyner@ed.gov.

February

Black History Month.

The Federal Resources for Educational Excellence (FREE) Web site—<http://www.free.ed.gov>—offers hundreds of teaching and learning resources highlighting the heritage of African-Americans and covers such topics as the Civil Rights Movement, Tuskegee Airmen and Harriet Tubman.

Feb. 17-23

National Engineers Week,

sponsored by the National Engineers Week Foundation to highlight the importance of advanced math and science literacy, will include among other events "Introduce a Girl to Engineering Day" on Feb. 21. Visit <http://www.eweek.org>, or call 703-684-2852.

QA

How can I find out how my child's school is doing?

Publicizing data about student performance is a critical tool for promoting accountability: It helps parents see where schools and districts are succeeding and where there is still work to do.

Under the *No Child Left Behind Act*, states and local districts that receive federal funding must publish annual report cards on how their schools and students overall are performing. These report cards must include test score data that indicate the percentage of students who have achieved basic, proficient or advanced levels on standardized tests in reading and math in grades 3-8 and at least once in high school (as well as on tests in science beginning this school year). Furthermore, this data must be broken down by the following student subgroups: race/ethnicity, economically disadvantaged, limited English proficient and students with disabilities.

Based on this achievement data, report cards

must also show whether or not schools have met their state's targets for adequate yearly progress (AYP)—the minimum level of improvement as measured by student assessments and other academic indicators (e.g., attendance and graduation rates) that schools must achieve. Those schools failing to meet AYP for two consecutive school years are identified as "in need of improvement."

In addition to assessment and accountability data, report cards should also include information on the professional qualifications of teachers, including the percentage of classes lacking highly qualified teachers in high- versus low-poverty schools.

States and districts should disseminate these report cards as early as possible after the school year ends so that educators have critical information for improving instruction and parents can make informed decisions regarding public school choice and free tutoring options. By and large, state and district report cards are posted on the state's Web site and may also be available in local schools, libraries, community centers and other public locations.

For information on how your child's school is doing, contact the school or the district or state education office.

News Show to Celebrate NCLB's Sixth Year

The January edition of *Education News Parents Can Use*—the Department's live, monthly television program—will celebrate the sixth anniversary of the *No Child Left Behind Act* and showcase schools and districts that have been successful in using the law's bedrock principles of accountability for results, parent empowerment and doing what works to close academic achievement gaps and help all students succeed.

No Child Left Behind has ushered in a new era in American education since it was first signed into law in 2002. At a time when our student population is becoming more diverse, educators and students are rising to the challenge and

excelling in the classroom. According to the 2007 Nation's Report Card, reading and math scores are at all-time highs and achievement gaps are closing. Guests on January's show will explore the ways in which higher standards and accountability, flexibility and parent information and school choice are helping to raise reading and math test scores for students across the country.

Each month, *Education News Parents Can Use* showcases: schools and school districts from across the country; conversations with school officials, parents and education experts; and advice and free resources for parents and educators.

To learn about viewing options, including webcasts, visit <http://www.ed.gov/edtv>, or call toll-free 1-800-USA-LEARN.





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Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act

In the wake of the Virginia Tech tragedy, federal officials conducted a "listening tour" about school safety and emergency preparedness in communities across the country from which several themes emerged, including the need for additional guidance on the *Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA)*.

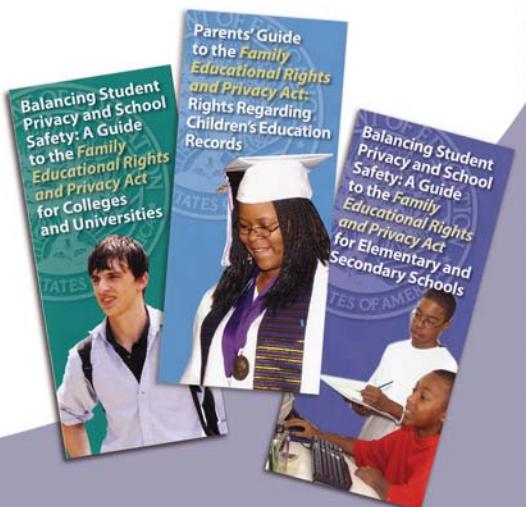
In response, the U.S. Department of Education has released three new guides—for parents, K-12 educators and higher education officials—on the federal law that protects the privacy of students' education records. Generally, *FERPA* requires schools to ask for written permission before disclosing a student's personally identifiable information to individuals other than the parent. The guides provide information so that, empowered by an understanding of the law, parents will be able to protect their children's privacy and school officials will know how to act decisively and quickly to maintain school safety when threats arise. Among the issues addressed are

- > Exceptions to the rule, including disclosures that involve information

designated as "directory information";

- > The disclosure of images of students captured on security videotapes; and
- > The type of disciplinary records that may be disclosed without a student's consent.

For a free copy of these guides, visit <http://www.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/fpco/ferpa/safeschools>; or call 1-877-4ED-PUBS with the following identification numbers for the guides while supplies last: parents (ED003907H), school officials (ED003906H) and postsecondary officials (ED003905H).



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